

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-10 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-10 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SPC-03 SS-20

USIA-15 SAM-01 OMB-01 DRC-01 /106 W

----- 091390

R 191902Z FEB 74

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8069

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

AMEMBASSY PARIS

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, UK

SUBJECT: GENERAL ELECTION: THE LIBERALS

1. SUMMARY: DESPITE A SHAKY START, THE LIBERALS ARE STARTING TO MAKE AN IMPACT ON THE CAMPAIGN. THEY ARE FIELDING MORE CANDIDATES THAN AT ANY GENERAL ELECTION SINCE 1910, AND THEIR SUPPORT, AFTER SLIPPING INITIALLY, SHOWS SIGNS OF REVIVING. AGAINST THE ODDS, THEIR CHANCES OF HOLDING THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE NEXT PARLIAMENT ARE STILL VERY MUCH ALIVE. END SUMMARY

2. AS THE CAMPAIGN PASSES THE HALF-WAY MARK, THE IMPACT OF THE LIBERAL VOTE ON THE OUTCOME LOOMS MORE AND MORE UNPREDICTABLE. CONTRARY TO THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM
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THAT BY-ELECTION CONVERTS TO LIBERALISM RETURN TO

THEIR TRADITIONAL LOYALTIES IN A GENERAL ELECTION, OPINION POLLS PUBLISHED OVER THE WEEKEND INDICATE THAT THE EROSION OF LIBERAL SUPPORT HAS BEEN ARRESTED AND EVEN REVERSED, AND THAT THE PARTY IS CURRENTLY ENJOYING LEVELS OF SUPPORT RANGING FROM 14 TO 19 PERCENT. FURTHERMORE, IT WAS ANNOUNCED YESTERDAY THAT THE LIBERALS WOULD FIELD 517 CANDIDATES, THE HIGHEST TOTAL SINCE 1910. (IN 1970, WITH 332 CANDIDATES, THEY POLLED 7.5 PERCENT OF THE VOTE, LOST 182 DEPOSITS, AND WON ONLY SIX SEATS.)

3. THE LIBERALS GOT OFF TO A SHAKY START IN THIS CAMPAIGN. THEIR MANIFESTO, LAST IN THE FIELD, WAS TOO LONG AND POORLY WRITTEN, AND THEIR POLICIES, WELL-INTENTIONED THOUGH THEY MIGHT BE, FAILED TO CATCH THE IMAGINATION. THEY HAVE IN FACT SCARCELY BEEN MENTIONED, LET ALONE DEBATED, SINCE THE MANIFESTO CAME OUT.

4. MORE IMPORTANT HAS SIMPLY BEEN THE AVAILABILITY OF THE LIBERALS AS A MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD ALTERNATIVE TO THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES. JEREMY THORPE STARTED THE CAMPAIGN BY CALLING ON THE VOTERS TO REJECT THE STERILE CLASS CONFLICT OF TWO DISCREDITED PARTIES, BUT IT WAS NOT UNTIL THE TORIES AND THE SOCIALISTS HAD HAD A FULL WEEK IN WHICH TO BASH ONE ANOTHER THAT HIS APPEAL BEGAN TO FIND MUCH RESONANCE. OVEREXPOSURE OF HEATH AND WILSON ON NIGHTLY TELEVISION HAS PROBABLY HELPED TOO TO PROMOTE SOME "PLAGUE ON BOTH" SENTIMENT. ON FEBRUARY 15, THE GUARDIAN WENT SO FAR AS TO DESCRIBE THE LIBERALS AS "THE GENUINE MODERATES AND CONCILIATORS," AND TO WELCOME THE PROSPECT OF THEIR HOLDING THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE NEXT PARLIAMENT.

5. WHETHER SUCH A THING COMES TO PASS DEPENDS, OF COURSE, NOT JUST ON HOW WELL THE LIBERALS DO, BUT ON HOW CLOSE THE CONSERVATIVES AND LABOR FINISH. WITH NINE DAYS TO GO, THE OUTCOME REMAINS WIDE OPEN.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: ELECTIONS, POLITICAL PARTIES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 19 FEB 1974
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: golinofr
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1974LONDON02197
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: n/a
From: LONDON
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1974/newtext/t19740224/aaaaawyc.tel
Line Count: 99
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: golinofr
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 02 APR 2002
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <02 APR 2002 by elyme>; APPROVED <03 JUN 2002 by golinofr>
Review Markings:

Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
30 JUN 2005

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: GENERAL ELECTION: THE LIBERALS
TAGS: PINT, UK
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005